



PLANT HIGHLIGHT: Summer Spinach, Amaranth, Purslane

Common Name(s): Spinach, Wild Spinach

O'odham Name: Ivagī

Piipaash Name: Xvsho

There are several different plants the O'odham and Piipaash generically refer to as *spinach*, *ivagī* (O'odham) or *xvsho* (Piipaash). These nutritious wild greens are available at different seasons throughout the year and each has a more specific name. The summer season brings us two in particular, *Amaranthus palmeri* and *Portulaca oleracea*. No, these are not the O'odham and Piipaash names. These are the botanical names that include genus and species. Plants sometimes have several common names, and sometimes a single common name is used for several different plants. As a result, it can be confusing for people who are trying to learn about plants. Botanical names provide consistency and make research easier. O'odham and Piipaash names provide a foundation for traditional plant knowledge.

Common Name(s): Pamler Amaranth, Pigweed

Botanical Name: *Amaranthus palmeri*

O'odham Name: Cuhukia

Piipaash Name: Akwav

Amaranth is one of the most easily identifiable and abundant wild plants growing along the edges of fields and irrigation ditches. While many see it today as a pesky weed, it was once a very important native food source. The tender leaves of these young plants are best picked when they are just a few inches tall. These leaves are cooked like spinach and contain high levels of, iron, protein and calcium. Before Europeans introduced dairy products, our calcium was obtained exclusively from plants such as this. Amaranth grows as tall as a man when it is mature and develops long flower spikes on top that are full of tiny nutritious seeds. The seeds are easily dislodged and gathered by shaking the flower spikes into a container. The traditional method



of preparing seeds is grinding them into flour, which can be eaten dry, mixed with boiling water or added as an ingredient to other meals.

Amaranth grain (seed) is high in calcium and has a protein score higher than most other grains, including corn and whole wheat. Most significantly, its protein is high in the amino acid, lysine, which is primarily found in animal proteins. Lysine is lacking in most plant proteins.

Common Name(s): Purslane, Verdolaga

Botanical Name: *Portulaca oleracea*

O'odham Name: Ku'ukpalk

Piipaash Name: Mushko

Common Purslane is a succulent plant that grows during the hot months. It grows along the ground with reddish stems radiating out from a central root. It is important to note that the edible Purslane has yellow flowers. The undesirable *Trianthema portulacastrum* or 'Horse Purslane' looks similar but has pink/purple flowers and larger leaves. Common Purslane stems and leaves are gathered before they develop



seedpods. The stems and leaves can be washed and eaten raw or cooked in a variety of ways. Locally, it is commonly cooked with onions and chili. A unique feature of Purslane is that it is one of the only greens to contain essential omega-3 fatty acids. There is some debate, however, as to whether vegetarian sources of omega-3 offer the same health benefits as that found in fish. With our ancestors, I suppose this wasn't much of an issue because fish from the Salt River was also a part of the regular diet.

Additional Information

"Is it a weed?" is a commonly asked question when discussing traditional plant use. The answer to that question is highly subjective. There is nothing that botanically determines whether a plant is or isn't a weed. "Weed" is a generic term usually applied to any plant that is considered unattractive, undesirable, and or has no known practical use. Native American plants such as potatoes and tomatoes were initially viewed as poisonous weeds by Europeans, until they learned to appreciate their value as food (Note: The leaves and stems of potato and tomato plants actually do contain toxins, which demonstrates the importance of knowing how to appropriately use a plant.). If one understands traditional uses for plants and values them as food or medicine, they cease to become weeds.

For additional information, ask the elders in your family or the greater Community. You'll find that some are very familiar with these wild greens, while other may have never tried them. The SRPMIC Cultural Resources Department is another resource, if you have any questions not addressed in this article. Lastly, the internet is full information on these plants. Amaranth seeds (albeit not the local variety) may be purchased on-line and at some local health food stores. You probably won't find Amaranth and Purslane greens available commercially (maybe seasonally in some Mexican markets), but many recipes for them can be found on the internet as well.

Bon appetit!

CAUTION

NEVER ingest any wild plant or plant part unless you are absolutely certain about its identity and appropriate use. While many native plants are edible and have beneficial medicinal qualities, they can cause injury or death if used improperly. Ingesting an unknown plant can be just as dangerous as swallowing unlabeled pills from the medicine cabinet.

Second, be very cautious of where you gather edible plants. While the plants themselves may not be dangerous, they may be contaminated from their environment. Today, wild greens are often most abundant along irrigation ditches. Plants in these areas, however, should be avoided as these areas are regularly exposed to exhaust from adjacent road traffic, pesticides used for commercial farming and weed killers. Only gather from pristine areas. If you have a garden, these wild greens are likely to grow naturally, and this is an ideal place to gather them (Regardless of where you gather from, all plants should be thoroughly washed before eating.). So, rather than trying to dig them out or spraying them with toxic chemicals, allow them to grow and eat them along with your corn, squash and other vegetables. In doing so, you will be following the ways of our ancestors, contributing to the health of the environment and contributing to your own personal health.